

*Alicante Journal of English Studies* 27(2014): 61-77

## Women in Nabokov's Russian novels

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the presence of female characters in the Nabokov's novels of the Russian period (1925-1939). There is a pattern in the use of female characters that illuminates the novels studied. It clarifies our understanding of Nabokov's literary techniques and contributes to the comprehension of two major themes seen in all his works: the passionate yearning for his beloved Russia and the satiric perception of an imperfect world. Thus, two categories of Nabokov's women can be distinguished: the bearers of the Russian culture and the unfaithful vamps. The so called bearers of the Russian culture, presented and described in a positive way, function as guiding stars for their lovers: they help them to survive in the hostile surroundings of their exile. These characters represent the nature of the Russian womanhood; they are kind, tender, pure and supportive, and at the same time they are strong and powerful. Their descriptions allude to the heroines of the Russian literature and they share the author's passion for the Russian literature and culture. The so called unfaithful vamps represent the world of the *poshlost'*, vulgarity and deceit. These female characters have common characteristics that make them unpleasant: they are ignorant in the world of art and literature, and they are greedy owners representing passion and lust. After this classification of Nabokov's women we see that his two main modes of presenting female characters reflect his two major themes: they function as the personification of the lost paradise of the past Russia and as an embodiment of human fallibility and weakness.

**Keywords:** Nabokov, female characters, novels, Russian culture.

This article examines the presence of female characters in the Nabokov's novels of the Russian period (1925-1939). It does not review Nabokov's own attitudes to women in general. Nabokov's literary legacy has been studied from different perspectives. However, despite the considerable amount of criticism that this legacy has produced since 1960s, the studies on Nabokov's female characters seem to be scarce (except the ones on *Lolita*).

Several dissertations, recently presented on this topic, are worth mentioning here. In 2001, Elena Rakhimova-Sommers defended her doctoral thesis "The *Ona* (She) of Nabokov's Hereafter: Female Characters as Otherworldly Agents in Nabokov's Fiction" at the University of Rochester (Rochester, New York). The author studies five categories of Nabokov's otherworldly womanhood: daughter, childhood fiancé, mother, wife and mistress. These women function as otherworldly agents who stay between the two worlds and "fill the vacuum left by indifference and cruelty with their love, tender care, compassion and also sadness" (Rakhimova-Sommers, 2001: 237). The same year, Lara Delage-Toriel presented her dissertation "Ultraviolet Darlings. Representations of Women in Nabokov's Prose Fiction" at the University of Cambridge. Her work is a good starting point to study Nabokov's female characters. The author identifies the following categories of Nabokov's women: vulgar and virtuous, muses, mothers and young mistresses. In 2007, Maxalina Idrisova presented a dissertation "*Kontseptsiya zhenskogo mira v romanaj Nabokova*" ("The concept of the female world in Nabokov's Russian novels"), centred on two types of women: mothers and companions.

The gender question in Nabokov's fiction was the focus of a Nabokov's panel entitled "Feminist Approaches to Nabokov" in the 1991 MLA Conference. There were papers presented on this topic offering different perspectives. For example, Charles Nicol traced a lineage of the lost and the beloved girls inhabiting Nabokov's prose in "Limited to the Male Perceptions: Colette, Lolita and the Wife of Chorb". Susan Sweeny discussed Nabokov's intertext of the feminine in Smoodin's feminist novel *Inventing Ivanov*. Robinson's talked about "Producing Woman as Text: Narrative Seduction in *Lolita*", in which a feminist tries to deconstruct the male discourse in the novel. But although these papers were thought-provoking and interesting, many more things have to be said on the subject of Nabokov's women. Not many articles have been published on this topic. We can mention Ljuba Tarvi's paper presented at the *Kyoto International Conference* and published in the proceedings with the title "Female Protagonists in Nabokov's Russian Novels: No Stars in the Cast?" (2010). Tarvi discusses the negative descriptive metaphors used to describe Nabokov's "unpleasant" female protagonists.

It is also interesting to mention that feminists have kept away from this subject. According to Delage-Toriel (2001: 6), "a noted feminist like Rachel Bowlby does not even hint at the gender issue in her chapter on *Lolita* in *Shopping with Freud*, although her analysis of popular culture has obvious affinities with this question". This is how Brian Boyd (1991: 655) interprets this kind of marginality:

...intellectual fashions too had changed. With the rise of feminism, novelists like Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood aroused excited attention. Someone so decidedly male as

Nabokov, equipped by his up-bringing with gentlemanly notions of honour and more comfortable with woman as muse than woman as writer, seemed a relic of the past. After all, it was he who had created Humbert, for whom *Lolita* barely exists except as a mere object of his emotion and his imagination. It could be easily overlooked that for Nabokov, *Lolita* was quite a different creature, a person in her own right, and one of the characters he found most admirable in all his work, or that his book seethed with indignation of Humbert's manipulation of all the women in his life.

This quotation invites us to find out more about Nabokov's female characters. In the Russian novels we have a starting point for any analysis on Nabokov's women. We should bear in mind that Nabokov's style and education as a writer began and developed during the Russian years: "...it was in Russian that he served his literary apprenticeship and forged his individual style" (Grayson, 1977: 182). This article shows that in his American novels Nabokov creates the same types of female characters that we see in his Russian novels. In our approach we see how Nabokov shapes his characters. We look at the way in which a particular type of female character appears in various novels in different disguises at various points in Nabokov's literary evolution. We compare similarities and singularities within a group of characters and see the implications of a specific representation, paying attention to the variety of expressions and plurality of Nabokov's representations.

When we study his female characters we have to bear in mind two things. The first one is that in almost all of his novels the focal agent is male (with the exception of his two "German" novels, narrated in the third-person, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Invitation to a Wedding*, *Invitation to a Feast* and *Invitation to a Journey*). As a result, women are constantly presented as objects of male perspective, which is often reductive on purpose. Although in Nabokov's fiction women remain strictly within the field of the male protagonist's vision, sometimes we can identify the author's affection towards his female characters. And second, the concept of "type" related to the Nabokov's female characters must be discussed keeping in mind Nabokov's ideology. We cannot forget his comments on *Eugene Onegin* when talking about Pushkin's character, Tatiana:

Tatiana is a type [...] is the mother and the grandmother of a number of female characters in the work of numerous Russian writers, from Turgenev to Chekhov. Literary evolution transformed the Russian Heloise – Pushkin's combination of Tatiana Larin and Princess N. – into the 'national type' of Russian woman, ardent and pure, dreamy and straightforward, a staunch companion, a heroic wife – and, in historical reality, this image became associated with revolutionary aspirations that produced during the subsequent years at least two generations of noble-born, delicate-looking, highly intellectual, but incredibly hardy young Russian women who were ready to give their lives to save people from the oppression of the state. This business of 'types' may be quite entertaining if approached in the right spirit (Nabokov, 1964a: 280).

We know that Nabokov did not like the use of the word 'type', he preferred "the specific detail to clear symbols, images to ideas, obscure facts to clear symbols and the discovered wild fruit to the synthetic jam" (Nabokov, 1973b: 7). His oeuvre contains a

number of similar types of female characters. If we want to understand Nabokov's characters we have to study the insects of the order *Lepidoptera* and more specifically his definition of species. He wrote that "the idea of species is the idea of difference; the idea of genus is the idea of similarity. What we do when trying to erect a genus, as the saying goes, is really the paradoxical attempt to demonstrate that certain objects that are dissimilar in one way are similar in another" (quoted in Johnson and Coates, 1999: 54).

Nabokov created female and male characters who share features with other cultural types or with each other within his canon and at the same time, who are gifted with particular characteristics of their own. That is why a simple classification of 'good' versus 'bad' characters is not enough when dealing with his literary legacy. His female characters do not deserve this simplification because such a classification makes Nabokov's heroines inferior to his male protagonists. It is problematic when we deal with women who present both positive and negative characteristics (for example, Lyda in *Despair* or Alla in *Glory*). This classification does not conform to his ideology, in which the concept of art is essential. The relation to art and artistic sensibility is a criterion used to characterise Nabokov's male protagonists. As an example, it is worth remembering a fake artist, Herman, from *Despair*, whose mockery on Pushkin and other writers that Nabokov respected leads him to failure; or Fyodor, from *The Gift*, who is a highly sensitive poet and one of Nabokov's favourite protagonists. The relation to art is also a criterion used to draw our taxonomy of female characters.

Thus, when reading Nabokov's Russian novels we can see a pattern in the use of female characters that illuminates the novels studied. It clarifies our understanding of Nabokov's literary techniques and contributes to the comprehension of two major themes seen in all his works: the passionate yearning for his beloved Russia and the satiric perception of an imperfect world.

The theme of Russia functions as a trademark in Nabokov's Russian novels. The topic is presented through references to the Russian culture and literature. "The Russian culture was always, both consciously and unconsciously, his [Nabokov's] guiding star" (Field, 1986: 1). His most beloved characters share with him the longing and love for the lost paradise of Russia. Thus, when talking about the artistic sensibility of his Russian characters we should talk about their relation to the Russian culture and literature. This lets us identify a category of female characters, the so called bearers of the Russian culture. As we have seen in other classifications of Nabokov's women, any of his characters can be assigned a different category; in other words, a mother can be a true companion for her husband or a spiritual supporter for her son or a mistress or can be both a muse and a damaging power. In the same way, our category of bearers of the Russian culture includes women that can be assigned different groups, such as mothers, muses, mistresses and lovers. The common feature they share is that all of them personify the Russian cultural legacy in the Russian novels. This cultural legacy becomes an essential spiritual support for the Russian exiles, since it helps them to survive in a foreign country, far from their beloved motherland.

The bearers of the Russian culture we identify in the Russian novels are Mary in *Mary*, Luzhin's wife in *The Defence*, Fyodor's mother and Zina in *The Gift* or Martin's

mother in *Glory*. They are presented and described in a positive way. In spite of their lack of a striking beauty, these women do enchant the male protagonists. For example, the protagonist of *Mary*, Ganin, outlines his love in this way: "...the strong colour in her cheek, the corner of a flashing Tartar eye, the delicate curve of her nostril alternately stretching and tightening as she laughed" (55), "delicate swarthy" (60), "black bow on the nape of her delicate neck" (56). He tries to recapture Mary's perfume: "She used a sweet perfume... Ganin now tried to recapture that scent again, mixed with the fresh smells of the autumn park" (*Mary*, 72). Mary is described with positive adjectives.

Another bearer of the Russian culture, who is charming but not beautiful, is Luzhin's wife in *The Defence*. This woman does not have a name but she plays an important role in the narration. She is described as

...not particularly pretty, there was something lacking in her small regular features, as if the last decisive jog that would have made her beautiful – leaving her features the same but endowing them with an ineffable significance – had not been given them by nature. She was twenty-five, her fashionably bobbed hair was neat and lovely and she had one turn of the head which betrayed a hint of possible harmony, a promise of real beauty that at the last moment remained unfulfilled. She wore extremely simple and extremely well-cut dresses that left her arms and neck bare, as if she were flaunting a little their tender freshness (*The Defence*, 68).

And Zina, although she does not have a striking beauty, Fyodor is fascinated by her appearance:

...her summer dress was short, of night's own colour, the colour of the streetlights and the shadows, of tree trunks and of shining pavement – paler than her bare arms and darker than her face (164), her pale hair which radiantly and imperceptibly merged into the sunny air around her head, the light blue vein on her temple, another on her long, tender neck, her delicate hand, her sharp elbow, the narrowness of her hips, the weakness of her shoulders and the peculiar forward slant of her graceful body ... – all this was perceived by him with agonizing distinctness" (*The Gift*, 165).

The most noticeable feature of these portraits is that they are not simply physical but also psychological; they reveal the subdued personality of these women. Compared to their delicate physical beauty, these female characters have a remarkably rich inner beauty. They share the same artistic sensibility that enables them to function as guiding stars for their lovers. Their descriptions allude to the heroines of the Russian literature and they show a very important feature: they share the author's passion for the Russian culture. For example, Mary (Masha in the Russian version of the novel), whose very name alludes to different Pushkin's heroines, such as Masha Troekurova (from *Dubrovsky*) or Masha Mironova (in *Captain's Daughter*), represents "the Russianness and functions as the centre of the spirituality and the noble Russian values in the novel" (Sergeev 2003: 54). For the protagonist, Mary epitomises his beloved Russia as well as

his favourite poet, Pushkin. He remembers her as being highly poetic: “she loved jingles, catchwords, puns and poems”. As we know, Nabokov knew the Russian folklore through the works of Pushkin, who “himself was a connoisseur of Russian songs and tales” (Figes, 2006: 212). In this way, the popular sayings that appear in the memory of some characters become a part of their childhood in the distant homeland. Mary is particularly fond of these sayings. For example, she likes repeating the same song or saying: “Vanya’s arms and legs they tied / Long in jail was he mortified” (72). In her letters she alludes to Pushkin’s poems: “How everything passes, how things change” (109). This line is taken from “Farewell” (1830): “Years pass by, changing everything, changing us”. If we continue reading we find another reference to Pushkin. Mary writes in one of her letters: “It’s so boring, so boring. The days go by so pointlessly and stupidly – and these are supposed to be the best, the happiest years of our lives” (110). Oleg Dark (1990: 413) says that this passage alludes to the Pushkin’s poem “Day by day passes by”. All of Mary’s letters are full of poems and literary allusions, as we see in the following examples:

I think I am feeling rather too depressed today...  
 “But today it is spring and mimosa for sale  
 at all corners is offered today.  
 I am bringing you some, like a dream, it is frail”  
 Nice little poem (109).

Just now I read a poem in an old magazine: “My Little Pale Pearl” by Krapovitsky. I like it very much. ... Here’s something else I’ve read – by Podtyagin:  
 “The full moon shines over forest and stream,  
 look at the ripples – how rich they gleam!” (110)

For Ganin, Mary personifies his beloved Russia, that’s why his “parting from Mary [is understood as] his parting from Russia” (*Mary*, 83).

Another woman who alludes to Russian literature is Luzhin’s wife. She makes Luzhin read different masterpieces, such as *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* by Tolstoy or *Dead Souls* by Gogol. She calls her husband by his surname because “Turgenev’s heroines did it” (*The Defence*, 89). Quoting Boris Nosik (2000: 240), “she epitomises a Turgenev’s maiden, she is an ideal Russian woman who is characterized by her sensibility towards the other being’s suffering and who takes pity on unhappy creatures”. She is able to “feel constantly an intolerable, tender pity for the creature whose life is helpless and unhappy” (83). After Luzhin’s breakdown, “her only care in life was minute-by-minute effort to arouse Luzhin’s curiosity about things in order to keep his head above the dark water, so he could breathe easily” (*The Defence*, 150).

Zina is the most elaborated character of these three women in Nabokov’s Russian novels. She shares Fyodor’s passion for Russian literature: “What was it about her that fascinated him most of all? Her perfect understanding, the absolute pitch of her instinct for everything that he himself loved?” (*The Gift*, 164).

These three female characters represent the nature of the Russian womanhood, they are kind, tender, pure and supportive, and at the same time they are strong and powerful. That is why they become guiding stars for their lovers and they help them to survive in the hostile surroundings of their exile. For example, the image of Mary, recreated by Ganin's memory gives him enough strength to break up with his current girlfriend (whom he does not love, but is incapable of leaving). She brings "happiness and sunshine" to the dull and melancholic life of Ganin in Berlin: "It was not simply reminiscence but a life that was much more real, much more intense than the life lived by his shadow in Berlin" (*Mary*, 66). By remembering and reliving his romance with Mary, Ganin finds out the significance of his life. He breaks up with the daily oppressive life in Germany and heads for another country in order to begin a new life.

Stephen Parker (1984: 180) has stated that thanks to Luzhin's wife "the novel retains human kindness". She tried to isolate Luzhin from the nightmare of chess after his breakdown. She becomes the guiding force Luzhin needs to escape from the play's abyss, as "her being expressed all the gentleness and charm that could be extracted from his recollections of childhood – as if the dapples of light scattered over the footpaths of the manor garden had grown together into a single warm radiance" (*The Defence*, 129). She attempts to transform Luzhin's life, although she understands that Luzhin belongs to another dimension and feels that "she had opened the wrong door, entered where she had not intended to enter" (109). Since Luzhin is condemned to disaster, she can walk by his side, on parallel lines, but their ways will never meet. She is aware of her final failure just before Luzhin's suicide: "she had an aching feeling of impotence and hopelessness, as if she had taken a job that was too difficult for her" (*The Defence*, 234).

The emphasis on the chess theme is so strong that many readers assume that the position of this woman is peripheral. Nevertheless, if we look at this character from Luzhin's point of view, it becomes clear that her interaction with the chess voice is the key figure in the novel, according to Idrisova (2007: 26) "she takes an active part in the plot development, becoming a solution for Luzhin's inner conflict".

Zina concentrated all those qualities of her literary predecessors that make her really outstanding. She becomes not only the guiding force for her lover (as Mary for Ganin), and not only does she take care for him (as Luzhin's wife did), but she personifies an ideal lover. This ideal woman is both a spiritual companion and a muse. She helps him in his daily life, for example when Fyodor gets soaked to the skin in the rain, or when she gives him all her money so that he can pay the rent of his flat. Zina understands Fyodor and his gift and at the same time she inspires him:

...not only was Zina cleverly and elegantly made to measure for him by a very painstaking fate, but both of them, forming a single shadow, were made to the measure of something not quite comprehensible, but wonderful and benevolent and continuously surrounding them (*The Gift*, 164).

She brings happiness and harmony into Fyodor's life, "without her there would not be any morning mist of happiness" (*The Gift*, 166). She becomes his muse, inspiring

Fyodor to write his poems and a novel. Although Stephen Blackwell (2000: 1) has commented that she is not a “creative partner” in Fyodor’s literary enterprise, yet she does participate in his writing. Fyodor praises her reading qualities when he says that “there was an extraordinary grace in her responsiveness which imperceptibly served him as regulator, if not as guide” (189). He also recognises that sometimes he changes words and expressions in his writing, following Zina’s advice: “‘Wonderful, but I’m not sure you can say it like that in Russian’, said Zina sometimes, and after an argument he would correct the expression she had questioned” (*The Gift*, 188). This echoes the role of Vera in Nabokov’s real life. Let us remember Nabokov’s words in one of his interviews: “Well, after that my very kind and patient wife, she sits down at her typewriter and I, dictate, I dictate off the cards to her, making some changes and very often, very often, discussing this or that. She might say ‘Oh, you can’t say that, you can’t say that’. ‘Well, let’s see, perhaps I can change it’” (quoted in Stacy Schiff, 1999: 52).

Zina is gifted with that sense of observation which so many of Nabokov’s positive female characters possess. Fyodor is fascinated because “in talking to her one could get along without any bridges and he would barely have time to notice some amusing feature of the night before she would point it out” (*The Gift*, 164). Zina and Nabokov’s wife, Vera, share this quality of observation and keenness. In fact, Zina inherited many of Vera’s characteristics. For example, both of them worked as secretaries and translators in law firms and both of them were familiar with their lover’s poetry before meeting them in person. Alexandra Popoff’s quotation about Vera also describes Zina perfectly: “She began to esteem him as a poet before they were acquainted, attended his readings, and clipped his publications from the liberal émigré newspaper” (Popoff, 2012: 179). Schiff also pointed out several common characteristics. For instance, she noted that “in Vera he [Nabokov] found the odd combination of feminine grace and unfeminine determination that Fyodor so admires in Zina” (41), or “Zina shudders with indignation at the attacks of Fyodor’s critics, just as Vera did” (Schiff, 1999: 93).

In the novel, Zina (like Vera in the real life) gives Fyodor the moral and spiritual support he needs to create his literature and to dwell in the exile. As we can see, Zina personifies all those qualities Nabokov appreciated in his female characters as well as in real women too. It is important to mention that in his American novels Nabokov develops this image of the ‘woman who inspires’ in such characters as Dolores in *Lolita*, Ada in *Ada*, Sybil in *Pale Fire*, Vadim’s last wife in *Look at the Harlequins* and Laura in the *Original of Laura*.

Apart from these three women, Mary, Luzhin’s wife and Zina, we also identify other secondary female characters who become bearers of the Russian culture: Martin’s mother, Sofia, in *Glory* and Fyodor’s mother, Elizaveta Pavlovna, in *The Gift*. If we consider that almost all of Nabokov’s fictional mothers are described negatively and show a lack of relationship with their children (Margot’s mother in *Laughter in the Dark*, Franz’s mother in *King, Queen, Knave*, Luzhin’s mother in *The Defence*, Yasha’s mother and Marianna Nikolaevna in *The Gift*, Charlotte Haze in *Lolita*, Marina in *Ada*, or Mme Chamar in *Transparent Thing*), then, Sofia and Elizaveta Pavlovna are set apart



from the others. They cultivate in their sons the love for literature and inculcate in them the art of memory. For example, Sofia, as well as Nabokov's mother, foster in their sons the love of English literature: "In St Petersburg she was known as an Anglo-maniac... it follows that Martin's first books were in English: his mother loathed the Russian magazine for children *Zadushevnoe Slovo* (*The Heartfelt Word*)" (*Glory*, 14). They share with their sons an intense feeling and longing for their lost Russia, and "this intense nostalgia, which abolishes one type of reality and substitutes it with a more personal one, echoes the character's yearning for a return to Russia, and constitutes one of Nabokov's most recurrent leitmotifs" (Delage-Toriel, 2001: 130). For example, Sofia, like Martin, yearns for Russia and hopes to see her motherland as it were before:

Sometimes she wondered when Russia would at last snap out of the evil dream, when the striped pole of the frontier gate would rise and everyone return and resume his former place, and, goodness, how the trees have grown, how the house has shrunk, what sorrow and joy, what a smell of earth! (*Glory*, 122).

Both mothers follow the Russian traditions and become bearers of childhood memories and childhood comfort for their sons. We see it when Elizaveta Pavlovna plays memory games with Fyodor, imagining that they are in Russia again:

They played like this: sitting side by side and silently imagining to themselves that each was taking the same Leshino walk, they went out of the park, took the path along the field, across the shady graveyard where the sun-flecked crosses were measuring something terribly large with their arms and where it was somehow awkward to pick the raspberries, across the river [...] to the Pont des Vaches and farther, through the pines and along the Chemin du Pendu – familiar nicknames, not grating to their Russian ears but thought up when their grandfathers had been children. And suddenly, in the middle of this silent walk being performed by the two minds [...] both stopped and said where they had got, and when it turned out, as it often did, that neither one had outpaced the other, having halted in the same coppice, the same smile flashed upon mother and son and shone through their common tear (*The Gift*, 86).

According to Idrisova (2007: 75), Fyodor's mother is a model for both, an ideal mother for her children and a spiritual companion for her husband.

As we can see, these five women – Mary, Luzhin's wife, Zina, Sofia and Elizaveta Pavlovna – become bearers of the Russian culture and strong supporters of the male protagonists. These female characters are not frequent in Nabokov's Russian novels but their role is essential in the works because they are powerful enough to bring humanity and compassion into the imperfect world governed by *poshlost'* and vulgarity.

The fictional world of Nabokov's novels is inhabited by numerous 'negative' female characters. The so-called unfaithful vamps (Lyudmila in *Mary*, Margot in *Laughter in the Dark*, Matilda in *The Eye*, Marthe in *King, Queen and Knave*, Alla in *The Glory*, Marthe in *Invitation to a beheading*, Marianna in *The Gift*, among others) represent the world of the *poshlost'*, vulgarity, deceit, "egotism, falsity and hypocrisy" (*LRL*: 239). In

all Nabokov's novels the readers find the representatives of *poshlost'*. Let us see Nabokov's definition of this term:

The Russian language is able to express by mean of one pitiless word the idea of a certain widespread defect for which [...] other languages I happen to know possess no special term...English words expressing several, although by no means all aspects of *poshlost'*, are for instance: 'cheap, sham, common, smutty, pink-and-blue', a bad taste, inferior, sorry, trashy, scurvy, tawdry, gimcrack and others under 'cheapness'. All these however suggest merely certain false values for the detection of which no particular shrewdness is required [...] but what Russians call *poshlost'* is beautifully timeless and so cleverly painted all over with protective tints that its presence often escapes detection (Nabokov, 1961: 63-64).

In one of his interviews, Nabokov (1973b: 101) offered a further definition of this word: "Corny trash, vulgar clichés, philistinism in all its phrases, imitations of imitations, bogus profundities, crude, moronic and dishonest pseudo-literature – these are obvious examples". Svetlana Boym (1994: 44) summarises the meaning of *poshlost'* in this way:

*Poshlost'* and its vehement critique are at the core of the definition of Russian identity, both national and cultural. The usage encompasses attitudes towards material culture and historical change, and it determines ethical values, particularly with respect to sexuality and occasionally with respect to femininity, since *poshlost'* is occasionally personified as a *salon madame* of loose morals.

Nabokov's Russian novels present a large gallery of vulgar women, bearers of *poshlost'*, where he encapsulates various shades of vulgarity. All his female representatives of *poshlost'* share the same characteristic: they are ignorant in the world of art and literature. Their relation to art is a criterion used to identify these women as unfaithful vamps. Within this family of female characters, two subtypes can be identified. On the one hand, we find women with unpleasant physical appearance, quoting Tarvi (2010: 81), "Nabokov's Russian female protagonists seem to be unpleasant because the descriptive metaphors used to describe them are predominantly negative". On the other hand, we distinguish beautiful vamps whose superficial beauty seduce the male protagonists and lead them to disaster. Another common characteristic of these women is that most of them are greedy vamps who personify passion and lust.

If we look at these female characters with a close scrutiny we find that the first unfaithful vamp appears in *Mary* with Lyudmila. She does not have a striking beauty that seduces men, yet she does attract Ganin in such a way that he is incapable of leaving her. Although Ganin cannot stand her appearance because "everything about Lyudmila he found repulsive: her yellow locks, fashionably bobbed, the streaks of unshaven black hairs down the nape of her neck, her dark, languid eyelids, and above all her lips, glossy with purple-red lipstick" (*Mary*, 12), he cannot break up their relationship. She represents one of the typical characteristics of the *poshlost'* in Nabokov's works: the smelly body. Ganin repels her smell: "There seemed to him something sleazy, stale and old in the smell of her perfume, although she herself was

only twenty-five" (12). He does not feel at ease with her because he is aware of her falsity and her artistic and literary ignorance:

...the falsity which she trailed around everywhere like her scent, the falsity of her baby talk, of her exquisite senses, of her passion for some imaginary orchids, as well as for Poe and Baudelaire, whom she had never read... (*Mary*, 13).

The reader realizes that they belong to different worlds. One of the passages of the novel shows this when they are at the cinema. Ganin likes the film, but for Lyudmila "it's pure rubbish":

...Lyudmila talked throughout the film about other things, bending across Ganin's knees towards her friend, every time dousing him in the chilling, unpleasantly familiar smell of her perfume. It was made worse by the fact that the film was thrilling and excellently done... (*Mary*, 24).

Although Lyudmila shows the vulgar characteristics of other vamps, she is quite less harmful than her literary successors. She does not destroy Ganin's life because thanks to the image of Mary, revived by Ganin's memory, he leaves her on time. This character becomes a mere symbol of the vulgar and oppressing life in Berlin for the Russian exile.

Another harmless vamp is Alla Chernosvitova. According to Maxim Shraer (2000: 243), this character is "a kind of half an image and half a myth of Akhmatova and at the same time serves as a caricature of the female writers of the XIX century". Physically Alla Chernosvitova reproduces some features of the poet Akhmatova:

She was twenty-five, her name was Alla, and she wrote poetry: three things, one would think, that were bound to make a woman fascinating. [...] The ladies would copy [her poetry] from each other, learn it by heart and recite it. Married at eighteen, she remained faithful to her husband for more than two years, but the world all around was saturated with the rubineous fumes of sin; clean-shaven, persistent males would schedule their own suicides at seven Thursday evening, midnight Christmas Eve, or three in the morning under her windows. A Grand Duc languished because of her; Rasputin pestered her for a month with telephone calls. And sometimes she said that her life was but the light smoke of an amber-perfumed Régie cigarette (*Glory*, 37).

This description alludes to Akhmatova's life. She was married three times and she almost got married a fourth time. Apart from her poetry, she was famous for having many lovers and for her outstanding beauty. For example, one of her contemporaries spoke of her appearance saying that "Anna Akhmatova was not a beauty. She was more than a beauty, better than a beauty. I've never seen a woman whose face and whole appearance stood out wherever she was in the midst of any beauties, with such expressiveness, such genuine animation" (Adamovich, 2000: 90). She became a famous poet when she was young and her poetry had a considerable influence on contemporary female writers. All these Akhmatova's features can be easily traced in the character of

Alla. Martin has a romance with Alla; he is seduced by her appearance more than by her poetry: “Martin did not understand any of this at all. Her poetry left him somewhat perplexed” (37). Meanwhile Sofia, Martin’s mother, feels ashamed of Alla’s vulgarity: “she could not ignore the fact that even though Alla was a sweet, affable young lady, she was perhaps a little too fast, as the English say, and, while excusing her son’s folly, Sofia did not excuse Alla’s attractive vulgarity” (39). Martin’s affair with Alla was short, though intense. This vamp did not destroy Martin’s life, although Alla’s husband almost caught them committing adultery and during the following nights Martin was afraid of Mr Chernosvitov’s revenge. Alla became part of Martin’s past as soon as he left Greece: “his memory of Alla Chernosvitov had reached its ultimate perfection, and he would say to himself that he had not sufficiently appreciated the happy days in Greece” (*Glory*, 50).

Another vamp, who is keen on sex and lust, is Marthe, Cincinnatus’s wife in *Invitation to a Beheading*. This woman personifies adultery as she has relations with her lovers anywhere and everywhere:

Meanwhile Marthe began deceiving him during the very first year of their marriage; anywhere and with anybody. Generally when Cincinnatus came home she would have a certain sated half-smile on her face as she passed her plump chin against her face as if reproaching herself, and, gazing up with her honest hazel eyes, would say in a soft cooing voice, “Little Marthe did it again today”[...] sometimes to justify herself, she would explain to him, “You know what a kind creature I am: it’s such a small thing, and it’s such a relief to a man. Soon she became pregnant, and not by him. She bore a boy, immediately got pregnant again – again not by him – and bore a girl” (31).

Marthe is simple and ignorant, her inner world “consists of simple components, simply joined, the simplest cook-book recipe is more complicated than the world that she bakes” (63). Cincinnatus catches her deceiving him with her lovers at his house and even during family meals, that’s why when he enters any room he announces his presence and during the dinner he is afraid of looking below the table and seeing “that monster whose upper half was quite presentable, having the appearance of a young woman and a young man visible down to the waist at table, peacefully feeding and chatting, and whose nether half was a writhing, raging quadruped” (64).

Cincinnatus loves Marthe in spite of her constant unfaithfulness, he tries to make her his spiritual companion, but she does not value it, nor is she able to understand him. In the world of deception and falsity where Cincinnatus is trying to survive, this woman becomes the most significant illusion for him. Her character reinforces the central theme of the novel (deception and artificiality) as she is “the embodiment of all the vices and cynicism that govern that world” (Idrisova, 2007: 71). The protagonist realizes that they belong to different dimensions, the very moment when he understands that he is not a part of his surrounding world. Cincinnatus leaves Marthe in the kingdom of *poshlost* while he is heading for the otherworld, “where stood beings akin to him” (*Invitation to a Beheading*, 223).

Another harmless vulgar character is Luzhin's mother-in-law. She shares similar negative features with Lyudmila: those of unappealing appearance (she is "a stately lady with plump arms"), as well as her artistic ignorance. Instead of longing for the true lost Russia (as positive female characters do), she substitutes this Russia with corny and vulgar symbols. She and her husband

... decided to start living in strict Russian style which they somehow associated with ornamental Slavic scriptory, postcards depicting sorrowing boyar maidens, varnished boxes bearing gaudy pyrogravures of troikas or firebirds, and the admirably produced, long since expired art magazines containing such wonderful photographs of old Russian manors and porcelain (82).

She wears Russian typical clothing and shows off her artificial Russianness. Unlike her mother, Luzhin's wife is much more sensitive towards the lost Russia and that's why she is completely indifferent

...to this gimcrack apartment, so unlike their quiet St. Petersburg house, where the furniture and other things had their own soul, where the icon-cabinet harboured an unforgettable garnet gleam and mysterious orange tree blossoms, where a fat, intelligent cat was embroidered on the silk back of an armchair, and where there were a thousand trifles, smells and shades that all together constituted something ravishing, and heartrending and completely irreplaceable (*The Defence*, 83).

Luzhin's mother-in-law is absent from the world of literature, yet she identifies herself with some Russian literary figures, as she calls "herself affectionately an "enfant terrible" and a "Cossack" (a result of vague and distorted reminiscences from *War and Peace*) (*The Defence*, 82-3). The readers perceive her ignorance as she misinterprets the Tolstoy's novel, confusing its heroines. This woman is a simple representative of *poshlost'*. She does not harm anybody in the novel, yet she does not like Luzhin and tries to separate unsuccessfully her daughter from him. Nevertheless, not all vamps are harmless. If we look at Matilda in *The Eye*, we see that Smurov detests her plump body with fat thighs: "... this plump, uninhibited, cow-eyed lady with her large mouth, which would gather into a crimson pucker, a would-be rosebud" (*The Eye*, 14). He gets bored with her very soon; however, he cannot leave her. He pays a high price for his romance with Matilda: he is humiliated and beaten badly by Matilda's husband. After this humiliation, Smurov decides to commit suicide.

Among these vamps, two women stand out because of their elaborated characters and the significant role they play in the novels. Unlike their literary predecessors, these vamps, Martha (*King, Queen, Knave*) and Margot (*Laughter in the Dark*) are female protagonists who have an active part in the narration. Both of them are German. Delage-Toriel (2001: 26) has said that "it is very possible that the nationality of Margot and Marthe also enabled Nabokov to embody *poshlost'* in its ideal form". This idea makes sense if we think about Nabokov's remark on *poshlost'* in relation to Germany: "among the nations with which [the Russian intelligentsia] came into contact, Germany had always seemed to them a country where *poshlost'*, instead of being mocked, was one of

the essential parts of the national spirit, habits, traditions and general atmosphere” (Nabokov, 1961: 64).

Martha Dreyer has a leading role in the novel. She attracts both her husband and her lover with her superficial charms. She is beautiful, cold and calculating. We can trace Martha’s narrow-mindedness in her interior monologues when she sits with her husband in a train carriage:

Life should proceed according to plan, straight and strict, without freakish twists and wiggles. ...an elegant book is all right on a drawing table. In a railway car, to allay boredom, one can leaf through some trashy magazine. But to imbibe and relish poems if you please,... in an expensive binding... a person who calls himself a businessman cannot, must not, dare not act like that (*King, Queen, Knave*, 10).

Dreyer and Franz are attracted by her superficial beauty and they are not able to see her true nature. Franz’s vision of Martha undergoes a dramatic change: “the creamy texture of her neck” and “ivory shoulders” are replaced with “a heavy bottom” and fat thighs; her “ebony sleek hair” appears to be adorned with a chignon; a dark shadow of the lip turns into tiny black hairs. Tarvi (2010: 83) talks about Martha’s change, seen by Franz in this way: “By the end of the novel, Martha’s most exquisite eyes turn to haggard ones, her snarling laugh into a dry one and her dreadful broad-jawed face reminds Franz of that of a toad. Martha also happens to share some of her descriptive metaphors (hairdo, birthmark, wart) with Franz’s mother whom he hates”. At the end of the novel he does not love her any more. He does not want to kill his uncle. However, he follows Martha’s plan because he is too passive to object. He does everything she wants.

Another man who is under Martha’s control is her husband. She succeeds in deceiving him because of his blindness. Dreyer is convinced that “she does not know the first letter of adultery” (175). In fact, she thinks of lovers as customary possessions for a woman of her standing: “she had been given a husband, a beautiful villa, antique silver, an automobile; the next on her list was Franz” (84). Martha “strictly [sticks] to the rules of adultery” (*King, Queen, Knave*, 115) and once she has Franz, she starts planning Dreyer’s murder. At the end, she does not succeed in murdering her husband to inherit all his money because she dies of a cold. Her death destroys Dreyer completely, whereas Franz feels relieved.

Another German representative of *poshlost* is Margot in *Laughter in the Dark*. This is one of the most elaborated of Nabokov’s vamps. The multiple points of view in the novel allow him to expose Margot’s best developed qualities: those of manipulation and vulgarity. From Margot’s point of view we can see that she likes seducing and provoking men, whenever she can. For example, the artist’s indifference to her naked body, while she was posing as a model, vexed her; that is why she decided to make up “her face for the sitting, painted her dry hot mouth, darkened her eyelids, and once even touched up her nipples with her lipstick” (19). She begins to prostitute herself whenever she needs money. We see how she considers Albinus’s riches, adopting different strategies to seduce him and to use him to get fame and wealth. She plans to destroy

Albinus's marriage and she is happy to know that his wife leaves him. Her vulgarity is underlined by Paul's perception of her when he hears her voice on the phone, "a vulgar, capricious, feminine voice" (51). And later when he meets her in person he takes her for a prostitute: "a little harlot, who ought to be in a reformatory" (62).

Albinus is in love with Margot and he does not see her vulgarity. He is attracted by her superficial beauty: "he stared at her face almost in dread: it was a pale, sulky, painfully beautiful face" (14); "he looked at her face in which everything was so charming – the burning cheeks, the lips glistening from the cherry brandy, the childish solemnity of the long hazel eyes, and the small downy mole on the soft curve just beneath the left one" (32). He likes everything in her: "even that vulgar Berlin slang of hers only enchanted the charm of her throaty voice and large white teeth" (34). Then he recognizes that she is not as perfect as he thought: "perhaps for the first time in the course of the year he had spent with Margot, Albinus was perfectly conscious of the thin, slimy layer of turpitude which had settled on his life" (114). Besides, he is not able to break up with Margot because he is a slave of his carnal desires. We should note that his attraction has mainly erotic connotations. He always concentrates his attention on her body, the body which is compared to a snake: she is described as a "torpid lizard" (57); she shuffles off her swimming-suit "snake-like" (82); she draws "herself higher and higher, like a snake when it uncoils" (139). Dr. Lampert describes her as "a lovely creature, unquestionably, but there is something snakelike about her" (*Laughter in the Dark*, 115).

Margot presents another characteristic of the vamps: her passion for sex. She is unfaithful to Albinus with Rex everywhere and always. She mocks Albinus's blindness and has relations with Rex in front of him. She does not leave him because she likes living at his expense and jeering at him whenever she can. In the following quotation we see her cruelty towards Albinus:

Margot, as she was being pressed to the blind's man breast, pushing away at his shoulder, would cast up her eyes to the ceiling with a comical expression of resignation or put out her tongue at Albinus – this was particularly amusing in contrast with the wild and tender expression of the blind man's face (*Laughter in the Dark*, 166).

Albinus loses his family, his sight and his life because of the destructive power of Margot. At the very beginning of the novel we read a summary of his life: "he was rich, respectable, happy; one day he abandoned his wife for the sake of a youthful mistress; he loved; was not loved; and his life ended in disaster" (*Laughter in the Dark*, 5). Without any doubt, Margot is one the most harmful vulgar temptresses in Nabokov's Russian novels.

As we have seen, these "pseudo-chosen" lovers, as Victor Erofeev (1988) calls them, seduce the male protagonists and with their destructive power lead them to degradation, despair and suffering. These women usually have a total control of their lover's will and life. Although they are beautiful, their beauty is merely superficial and false. As Delage-Toriel (2001: 32) suggests,

Nabokov's monochromatic portraits of *poshlii* women are a warning against the physical and spiritual traps that beauty may lay for its enchanted hunters; but for those who have detected them, *poshlost'* may also disclose many rewarding attraction. And Nabokov, for whom 'nothing was more exhilarating than philistine vulgarity', was not only aware of these attractions: he thrived on them.

That is why these unfaithful vamps are much more elaborated than the true spiritual companions and that is why they are presented from different perspectives and have an active role in the narration. Furthermore, in comparison with the number of positive female characters (there are only five), there are more vulgar temptresses in the Russian novels. It is worth noting that almost all minor female characters are presented as representatives of *poshlost'* (for example, Zina's colleagues from the office or Zina's mother in *The Gift*; Martin's lovers in *Glory*, Martha's mother in *Laughter in the Dark*, among others).

After analyzing Nabokov's female characters we see that his way of presenting them shows his two major themes: the personification of Russia as a lost paradise and the embodiment of human fallibility and weakness. He uses this contradictory presentation of female characters to fight the utter degradation, "ridicule and horror of having developed infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence" (Morgan, 1980: 27).

In Nabokov's American novels, the reader finds a gallery of women who show most of the characteristics of bearers of the Russian culture and unfaithful vamps. Although Nabokov uses the same pattern to create his 'positive' women, he also develops the characters of vamps by making them more appealing and more dangerous. Some of his most famous female protagonists share characteristics of both spiritual companions and vulgar temptresses. Their study is a field of further research.

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